

WORKSHOP ON  
HOUSEHOLDING IN TRANSITION:  
EMERGING DYNAMICS IN 'DEVELOPING' EAST AND SOUTHEAST ASIA  
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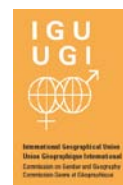
# Unpacking the Gender Paradox in Lao Households' Migration Decision-making Processes

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## **Introduction**

In his 1987 publication *The New Helots: Migrants in the international division of labour* Cohen boldly states that migration scholars should be concerned 'with men and women, [but] typically men, who are crossing a recognised political or administrative frontier for the purpose of selling their labour power' (my emphasis Cohen 1987: 33). The notion of 'feminization of migration' challenged this assertion based on the empirical observation of an increasing share of female migrant workers. Whilst these statistics played a powerful role in problematising the dominant image of the migrant worker as the adult male breadwinner, the real contribution of feminist critiques to migration studies was its relational contribution; demonstrating that migration (as well as the international division of labour Cohen refers to) is a highly gendered process which complexity cannot be reduced to statistics alone.

Since the turn of the Millennium next to the gender axis a generational axis has started receiving attention most notably through work on 'child migration' (Ensor and Goździak 2010; Hashim and Thorsen 2011; Ní Laoire *et al.* 2011). This development largely resembles the chronology of the gender and migration literature. It was firstly demonstrated that children (defined as young people below 18 years of age) are actively involved in migration, both as so-called independent child migrants and in the context of family migration. Second, it highlighted generation as an important social relation shaping young migrants' position in the social process of migration.

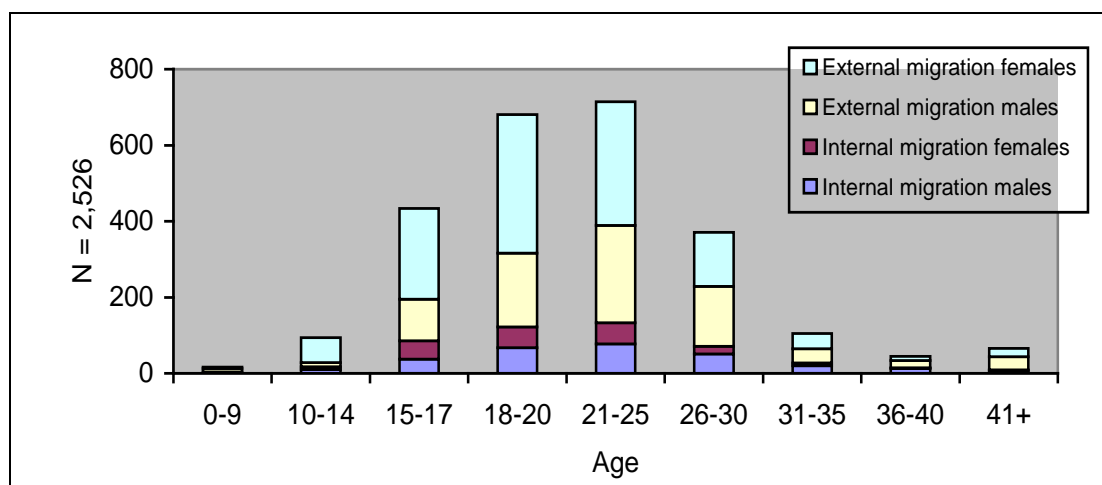
This paper focuses on a particular stage in the social process of migration, that of migration decision-making processes as playing out in the field of the household at a Lao migration origin site. It concentrates on young migrants who migrate before having attained social adulthood and departs from the gender-generation nexus shaping their migration decision-making processes. Qualitative analysis demonstrates that relations of gender and parent-child relations only partially capture the intersectionality underpinning migration-decision making processes, which furthermore play out in 'households in flux' due to a range of interconnected dynamics of an internal and external nature.

## **Young Lao Migrants: Quantitative Perspectives**

At a regional level it was particularly Southeast Asia that was associated with the term feminization of migration, much related to female factory workers and migrant domestic workers. The literature on child migration is, however, mostly based on research in Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (but note: Camacho 1999; Bryant 2005; Huguet and Sureeporn Punpuing 2005; Huijsmans 2008). This is surprising since it is well-known that a significant proportion of the Southeast Asian migrant population comprises of young people, and some may even be labeled 'child migrants' (see for examples Mills 1997; Rigg 2007).

Lao PDR is no exception here. Survey data collected on the basis of representative sampling techniques from a total of 5,966 households (36,398 household members) in three central and southern provinces (Savannakhet, Champassack and Khammuane) show that migration is clearly situated in the youth stage of the life course (MoLSW *et al.* 2003).

**Figure 1: Migration data from three Lao provinces (Khammuane, Savannakhet, and Champasack)**



Adapted from MoLSW et al (2003)

This data also show that generational patterns cross-cut with gender patterns. This is most evident in cross-border migration, which constitutes over 80 *per cent* of the sample.<sup>1</sup> Table 1 explores this nexus in more detail. It shows that altogether there are more female than male cross-border migrants (0.41 gender ratio). However, this is largely due to a significant overrepresentation of female migrants in both absolute and relative sense in the shaded cohorts. This disproportional share of female migrants is especially stark at the 10-14 cohort (1 male migrant for every 6 female migrant), and gradually reduces till the gender disparity more or less evens out in the cohorts concerning young adults (26-35 years) before tipping into a male overrepresentation amongst mature adult migrants, albeit one that is based on small absolute numbers.

The overrepresentation of young women in the lower age-cohorts is particularly striking given that in the Lao context it were traditionally young men who got involved in migration and mobility and seldom young women. It were not only boys and young men who left the natal household to join the Buddhist Sangha for shorter or longer periods of time. The phenomenon of *pai thiaw* (literally: to go wandering) was also an exclusively male activity, often made mention of in anthropological texts on Tai societies as a rite of passage involving unmarried young men (Kirsch 1966; Keyes 1986). Furthermore, and connected to the above, an ideology of matrilineal residence and inheritance patterns stimulated mobility of young men rather than that of young women.

<sup>1</sup> Note that the three provinces all border Thailand and that cross-border migration refers here in the vast majority of cases to cross-border migration to Thailand which is indeed the most common international destination of Lao migrants. Note further, that in internal migration male migrants outnumber female migrants (286;198; 0.59 gender ratio), also in the lower age cohorts (except 15-17 years).

**Table 1:**

age group	external migration		gender ratio
	Male	Female	
0-4	4	2	0.67
5-9	5	1	0.83
10-14	11	66	0.14
15-17	109	239	0.31
18-20	194	365	0.35
21-25	256	325	0.44
26-30	158	142	0.53
31-35	38	40	0.49
36-40	19	11	0.63
41-45	15	8	0.65
46-50	11	10	0.52
51-55	2	1	0.67
56-60	4	1	0.80
61-65	0	1	0.00
66-70	0	0	-
71+	3	1	0.75
TOTAL	829	1213	0.41

Adapted from MoLSW et al (2003)

Data of the 2003 Lao Migration Survey is useful for its quantitative strength, yet it also suffers from a number of shortcomings. Some are general shortcomings inherent to most one-off surveys on migration, others are methodological in nature or context specific. First, particularly in rural Lao PDR migration dynamics are affected by the agricultural calendar and, therefore, tend to have a seasonality which complicates the interpretation of any one-off survey (see also: Wright *et al.* 2011). In this case, the survey questionnaire includes a question on past migration next to inquiring about household members currently residing elsewhere. However, it remains unclear whether the analysis is based on data concerning past migration *and* current migration, which would to some extent have addressed the bias of seasonality, or only on the latter. Furthermore, the questionnaire is not clear on the definition of migration (e.g. duration of absence, the types and purposes of mobility considered migration, etc) that was used and seems to use the current age of migrants at time of survey rather than the age of first migration. In addition, a focus on labour migration specifically excludes other purposes of migration which may be framed as 'non-labour', but in which work nonetheless constitutes an important element.

Lastly, and probably the most pressing concern, undocumented migration is the most common form of migration in the Lao context but also one that still constitutes a highly sensitive issue, as is the case in most post-socialist contexts. This concerns internal migration, but especially cross-border migration into Thailand. In fact, Lao migrants continue to be fined for living in an undocumented manner in Lao towns and for leaving their rural homes without having informed local authorities (Somsack Pongkhao 2008b; Ekaphone Phouthonesy 2009). Moreover, the practice of fining (or arresting) is yet more widespread in relation to cross-border migration (Somsack Pongkhao 2008a). In such a context it is highly probable that survey research, which in the Lao context involves officials and due to the time pressure does not allow establishing any level of rapport with respondents, is likely to produce at best a distorted and under-reported impression, as responding positively to the migration question amounts, in most cases, to confessing an unlawful activity.

Ethnographic research conducted over a longer period of time addresses many of the problems of survey research described above, although, at the cost of statistical properties. The Figure 2 presented below combines household survey data collected in one predominantly ethnic Lao village situated on the Lao side of the Mekong River in October 2007 (which we will call *Baan Naam*) with observations on villagers' mobility from subsequent research covering more than one calendar year.<sup>2</sup>

A household survey was conducted in 54 out of the in total nearly 300 households comprising *Baan Naam*. The household survey found a significantly higher migration rate (18%) than the 6.9 percent observed in the 2003 Lao Migration Survey. However, this figure is not disproportionately high as research has shown that in the Lao context villages located on the road network and those near the Thai border tend to have considerably higher migration rates (MoLSW *et al.* 2003; Messerli *et al.* 2008). Both these characteristics apply to *Baan Naam*. Further, the household survey revealed a similar distribution of migration across age and gender as found by the 2003 Lao Migration Survey, although with a total of 35 male and 32 female migrants the overall gender distribution differs.

Figure 2 concentrates on migrant youth and migrant children specifically, drawing on a sub-sample of the household survey data described above complemented with data collected through subsequent observations and research activities. Data is presented on migration and mobility concerning young people leaving their natal without having attained social adulthood, which is locally understood as being married (and ideally followed by attaining father/motherhood and establishing one's own household), but excluding leaving the natal household for the purpose of marriage. Mobility and migration includes here both past and current events and was essentially defined as taking up residence somewhere else. The assessment of whether some form of mobility (given the distance and time it involved) constitutes an act of migration was left to the respondents, based on the assumptions that forms of mobilities which are considered part and parcel of everyday life are not brought up in response to questions about staying elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, the data presented here includes relocation to Southern Thailand as well as relocation to nearby destinations within Lao PDR. Furthermore, some migrations lasted years, whereas others were terminated within a few days. Lastly, data is organised by first age of migration for a total of 98 recorded migration events involving a total of 75 young migrants (34 male, 41 female).

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<sup>2</sup> All names of villages and people are pseudonyms.

<sup>3</sup> For example, commuting for day labour to the Thai village across the Mekong River (or other nearby villages on Lao soil) is here not considered migration as this was part and parcel of everyday village life, even though this may have involved spending a few nights on the Thai side of the River to cut out commuting costs.

**Figure 2: Main purpose of migration by age and sex for each migration event (n=98)**

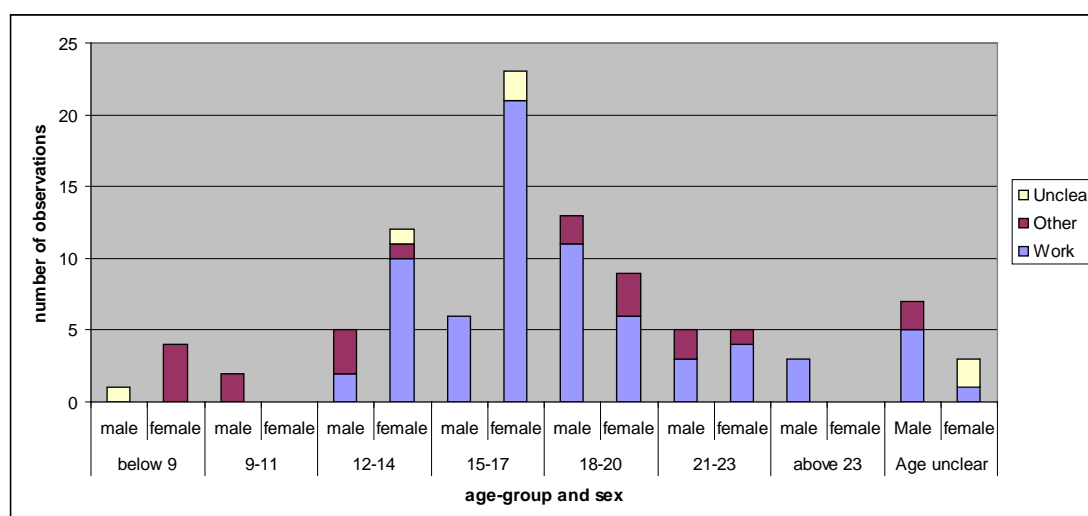


Figure 2 distinguishes between migration by stated purpose, limited to work (formal employment and informal work) and other purposes (including fosterage, education, joining the Buddhist Sangha). However, it should be stressed that such a distinction is in many cases far from clear-cut as work featured as an important dimension across all stated purposes of migration.

The gender-age nexus emphasised in relation to Figure 1 also emerges from Figure 2, but a focus on first age of migration seems to press the pattern towards lower age-cohorts. It is of further importance to note that in the two cohorts in which females are disproportionately present (12-14 and 15-17) this virtually only includes migration for purposes of work when it comes to female young migrants.

### ***Migration Decision-making Processes: Qualitative Perspectives***

The analysis presented above has shown that females are greatly overrepresented in migration data in the lower age-cohorts. This concerns young people who are according to local registers of meaning mostly not considered children (*dek noi*) anymore, but rather adolescents (*phu bao* and *phu sao*) or youth (*wai nhum*). However, these young people are still considered dependents in the context of their household. For this reason it makes sense to analyse the negotiations and factors underpinning their migration decision from a household perspective. This is done by drawing on feminist approaches to the household, which take issue with conceptualising the household as either a moral economy (Marxist approaches) or revolving around a joint utility function (neo-classical economics) as this hides important relations of power operating within the household (Folbre 1986b; Folbre 1986a; Hart 1992). Hence, in the feminist and gender literature it has now become undisputed that households comprise 'multiple actors, with varying (often conflicting) preferences and interests, and differential abilities to pursue and realize those interests' (Agarwal 1994: 54).

It is acknowledged that a focus on the sending context and the household in making sense of the gender-generation nexus in relation to young migrants is necessarily partial. An important limitation of this paper is, therefore, its lack of attention to demand side factors and, importantly, how this influences migration decision making processes at a supply side.

Limiting the focus to the field of the household and the supply side of migration it could be hypothesised that the overrepresentation of females in the lower cohorts may be due to the following dynamics. Stressing young women's agency, these patterns may be the result of rural teenaged girls being willing migrants whose desire to leave their rural homes is relatively unconstrained. Alternatively, assuming that household decision-making processes are predominantly adult-centred these patterns may suggest that

parents would rather see their daughters becoming involved in migration regardless of their willingness to become young migrants (see e.g. Lauby and Stark 1988). Whilst both lines of thought feature in the literature, the case of Buanoi presented below demonstrates that both perspectives are too one-sided.

Buanoi is 16 years old when we first meet her. She is the third-born in a relatively better-off family consisting of two parents and five children. She has two older brothers, a younger brother, and a younger sister. Her oldest brother left *Baan Naam* in August 2006 for migrant work through a recruitment agency in Thailand; the other siblings remained at home and were then still all in school. A year later (2007) Buanoi quit school at the start of secondary 4 against the wishes of her parents who put pressure on her to return to school. As the only one of the children out of school (apart from the brother in Thailand), she spent her days working the family fields and doing domestic work. Talking about this, Buanoi explained that she would rather work in Vientiane as many of her friends had gone there as well. She argued that it was no fun staying in *Baan Naam* since most of her friends were working elsewhere. However, her parents opposed this idea. They argued that work in Vientiane is much harder than working the family fields and only poorly paid. Despite these claims, retaining Buanoi's labour for the household economy seemed to be an important underpinning motivation on the part of the parents to discourage her from migration. Although this was not directly expressed, this became apparent when Buanoi's parents suddenly became more relaxed about their daughter's migratory ideas in late 2008. This only happened once her older brother (2<sup>nd</sup> born) had finished his secondary education and became full-time available to the family farm, and when, at about the same time, her younger sister had become a teenaged girl capable of doing most of the domestic work. Buanoi has since worked shortly in Vientiane and for several weeks in the *Isaan* region of Thailand. (Composite notes from interviews with Buanoi and Buanoi's parents conducted between Oct 2007-March 2009)

Buanoi's case appears to reproduce the idea that young villagers are all eager to trade their rural and agrarian lives for an apparently more exciting, advanced and modern urban, or cross-border experience. Whilst this is indeed an impression emerging from the literature (Mills 1997; Inthasone Phetsiriseng 2003) and one that was occasionally observed on the ground as well it should be stressed that this cannot be assumed. In fact, some of the young people interviewed (of both gender) expressed a desire to remain in the village, at times based on negative experiences in urban settings:

I don't want to live in Vientiane because people there will look at me since they can see that I'm from *baan nôôk* (the countryside). They will also talk about me since I will make mistakes. This will make me feel shy. I know this is true because I stayed in Vientiane when I was 14. My relatives had asked my mother if I could come and stay with them. I went and worked in my aunt's shop but I left after one week already because I felt I couldn't stay there. (Notes from photo-based interview with Choi on 7-8/2/2008, she was 15 years old at the time of interview)

Although Buanoi unambiguously stated a desire to leave her village she did not simply pack her bags and leave. This is significant particularly since Buanoi seemed to have ample scope for this given that many of her friends were already involved in forms of migrant work and may have had the ability to set her up for migrant work too. It is further worth noting that her parents did not have to press very hard to have Buanoi stay. A few subtle remarks here and there seemed to suffice in retaining Buanoi to the household.

When Buanoi eventually migrated this should be appreciated against the reconfigured relations of labour within the household due to her older brother now out of school and her younger sister now able to shoulder much of the work Buanoi used to do. Divisions of labour in rural Lao households are structured along gender and generational lines of division. This can be illustrated by data collected through a series of activities surveys conducted monthly between late 2007 and mid-2008 with a total 26 young villagers (13

male, 13 female) selected with an eye on fair distribution in terms of birth position, school/out of school, and age. This data, showed, on first impression, no great gender differences in the kinds of work related activities carried out by daughters versus sons. Both were involved in a wide range of activities (the recorded activities were grouped under 39 different headings; sons were found involved in 34 of these, and daughters in 34 too). However, looking at frequency patterns, significant gender differences emerge. The 13 girls and young women scored a total of 195 occurrences, whereas the 13 boys and young men came to 122 occurrences only. The relative absence of gendered taboos concerning working activities of Lao children and youth combined with the fact that girls and young women perform a wide range of working activities with considerably greater frequency than their male counterparts explains why parents may in some cases be more eager to retain (at least) a daughter to the household than a son as is discussed in more detail below. School participation is gendered too and also intersects with age. Enrolment rates at primary school level in *Baan Naam* show no gender disparity. In addition, at lower secondary school level female students are in fact overrepresented (0.71 gender ratio), but this tips into a significant male overrepresentation in upper secondary level (2.09 gender ratio). These relative shares hide, however, an overarching pattern of school drop out rates by age, clearly observable from the transition to primary 5 onwards and particularly pronounced in upper secondary education.

Whilst acknowledging the importance of intra-household dynamics which are, in turn related to larger manifestations of intersecting gender and generational inequalities, it should be stressed that young rural women are not mere pawns in structurally determined games. Buanoi's case serves to illustrate that both her stay in the household as well as her eventual departure are negotiated decisions and not ones which were uni-directionally forced upon Buanoi by her parents. Moreover, also Buanoi's emphasis that it was her who decided to quit schooling despite her parents' wishes shows that intergenerational relations of power affect daughters' agency but are not all-determining.

Throughout the research it was repeatedly claimed that daughters were far more responsive to parental pieces of advice and requests than sons. Perhaps more strongly, it seemed at times that conflicting with parental advice appeared constructed as appropriate gender behaviour in case of adolescent sons; demonstrating that they had a mind of their own, an apparent positive quality of young men. Choi's mother, for example remarked:

Girls will change their minds. Girls listen to, and believe their mother. But boys think they are stronger than girls and can take care of themselves. Therefore, they don't listen to their mothers. (Notes from interview with Choi's mother, 15/3/2009)

She made this remark in a conversation about her inability to stop her oldest son from leaving the household. Choi's household consists of four children and two parents. In 2006 the father together with the second born son left on a two year contract to Thailand through the same recruitment company as Buanoi's brother. In order to keep the family farm functioning the first born son had promised to postpone his marriage (and the subsequent leaving of the household) till his father and younger brother had returned. However, soon after his father's departure this son moved in with his in-laws anyway. Although he had promised to postpone the marriage ceremony till after his father's return and continue working his natal household's fields only the former promise he kept. Void of reliable and unpaid male labour, Choi's mother had to alter the household's agricultural production. She grew, for example, no melons for two seasons because she lacked male labour for the heavy job of harvesting melons and getting them out of the fields. This way she estimated she had lost at least one million Kip a year (110-120 USD).

A general pattern of greater responsiveness on part of daughters than sons to parental wishes and advice should, however, not be reduced to gendered socialisation practices, discursive constructions of the good daughter and the good son, and other forces operating at the local level. This is illustrated by Jonnie's responses below:



- Roy: How did your grandmother tried stoping you from going to Thailand?
- Jonnie: By talking to me, and telling me how much she would miss me because I had always stayed with her. She was very worried, because whenever we see news about Thailand [on Lao or Thai television] there are often bad things so she was worried that something bad would happen to me if I were to work there.
- Paai (RA): If you had been a girl, would it have been easier for your grandmother to convince you not to go?
- Jonnie: It would have been different. Girls would have listened and stayed. For example, I also wouldn't want my younger sister to go and work elsewhere because for girls it is more dangerous than for men. Men look stronger than women and are, therefore, safer. Also when we see the news, it is always girls to which bad things happen. Therefore, I also don't want my younger sister to go. (Excerpt from interview with Jonnie, 15/3/2009. Jonnie left at the age of 19 through a recruitment company for Thailand. Jonnie and his older brother and sister had since early childhood stayed with their maternal grandmother following their parents' divorce).

Jonnie repeats much of what Choi's mother said above, however, he adds the role of external forces (here modern media) in perpetuating and reinforcing local gender stereotypes. Importantly, concerns about the safety of daughter's in migration can thus not be reduced to level of the locale as 'tales [which] are part and parcel of the popular landscape of rural Laos, the subject of discussion, gossip, concern and speculation' (Rigg 2005a: 150). Rather, it should be acknowledged that such concerns are actively propelled into the popular imagination by popular media but also by external agents such as the state and INGOs in the form of anti-trafficking awareness raising (see also Walker 1999: 81-82).<sup>4</sup>

The general pattern of parents' lesser ability to steer the everyday behaviour and activities of their adolescent sons than their adolescent daughters was on two occasions also reflected in migration decisions concerning sons. Saang, for example, the sixth born out of a total of seven children was at the age of 14 sent to live with an older brother (first born) of him in another province when he started the final year of lower secondary education. Saang had lost his appetite for studying and, according to his parents, spent too much time with his friends. Sending him to a distant province under the strict supervision of his older brother, his parents viewed as the only way to ensure he would pass for his lower secondary school exam. Anu's migration was also heavily stimulated by his parents for disciplinary purposes. As the last born (seventh born) is a relatively well-to-do household his parents wanted him to complete secondary education. Anu did not, however, perform very well in school and did also not enjoy it much. For this reason he dropped out of school after secondary 3 despite continuous efforts of his parents to encourage him to return to school. Whilst out of school Anu assisted his father in smuggling villagers across the Mekong River and did some agricultural work as he had also done whilst still in school. However, he also spent much time cruising his motorbike and hanging around with friends. This hanging-around behaviour is typical for adolescent males and seldom observed amongst adolescent women, and rooted in traditional courting practices. Furthermore, this behaviour was of much concern for many parents as they feared their sons may get drunk, and get involved in motorbike accidents and fights. It is for this reason that Anu's father stimulated his son to take up migrant work on a road construction team doing work in a distant corner of the district. Life in a road construction camp and the discipline of the work itself Anu's father considered positive for Anu and would, at the very least, put an end to his lingering village life.

Parental encouragement to become involved in migration for the sake of discipline was never observed in relation to daughters. In cases in which parents actively encouraged their daughters to migrate this was mostly for financial purposes (remittances) or educational purposes (learning a skill/trade) and never for

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<sup>4</sup> Although this is not to deny that some of these stories have a real material basis in actual experiences of fellow villagers.

disciplinary sake. It should be added to this that daughters also appeared more diligent than sons when it came to remitting migrant earnings and some of these earnings appeared to facilitate continued education of younger siblings (regardless of sex).

So far, it has been suggested that daughters, more so than sons, tend to stay in their natal households if parents suggest so and only become involved in migration if the migration decision has become negotiable in an unconflicting manner or if actively encouraged by their parents. Whilst this indeed emerged as an important pattern, not all daughters displayed such levels of docility. Chanthawy, for example, had migrated several times for relatively short spells of time to North-eastern Thailand and Vientiane before leaving long term at the age of 17, initially together with her mother, to work in a pine-apple canning factory in southern Thailand. Chanthawy is the fifth and last born of a marriage that has more or less fallen apart due to the drinking habits of Chanthawy's father. Custom prescribes that last born daughters, like Chanthawy, stay with their parents to look after them in old age. However, it was clear that Chanthawy did not aspire to this ideal as she left the village regularly without informing her mother on much of the details of her whereabouts. When talking about this with Chanthawy's mother she complained that now that all her children have grown up she cannot control them anymore like when they were young children. Now, she said, her children have their own ideas and they won't just listen to their parents anymore. Furthermore, Chanthawy, she observed, acts as a boy in the way she talks, behaves and walks. She explained that in the past she had worried about this a lot and tried to make her change. Yet, she laughingly admits that she has now given up worrying. She has accepted that it is up to her children where they go and what they do and that she cannot control this anymore (interview with Chanthawy's mother, 29/2/2008).

### ***Households in Flux and Beyond Relations of Gender and Parent-Child***

The qualitative material discussed in the previous section has not undermined the quantitative observation of young women's overrepresentation in the lower age cohorts of migration statistics. Yet, it has added, however, important levels of nuances. It has shown that daughters tend to be more responsive to subtle and less subtle pieces of advice from their parents than sons. This may indeed mean that daughters are more inclined to become involved in migration if their parents encourage this. At the same time, however, these relations may also produce opposite results in case parents would rather not see their daughter becoming involved in migration. Such reasons, it has been shown, may be rooted in traditional gender stereotypes about young women's vulnerability when leaving the assumed protective haven of their natal household, which are, however, found reinforced through modern media and anti-trafficking campaigns. Furthermore, rural Lao household economics also provide strong reasons to retain daughters rather than sons to the household as daughters appeared to be flexible, reliable and far more active productive assets than sons. These two dimensions often interlock as underpinning the powerful vulnerability discourse may well be gendered and generational struggles over the economics of household production and reproduction.

Making better sense of these multiple and at times conflicting dynamics operating simultaneously in any given household, and underpinning particular sets of migration outcomes requires two conceptual moves. First, it requires conceptualising households as 'in flux', rather than static and stable units. Households are in flux due to internal dynamics of the kind already observed by Chayanov (Shanin 1982). Evans (2008) in a more recent piece argues for the lasting importance, in the rural Lao context, of Chayanov's sensitivity to the impact on household socio-economic conditions in relation to changes in households' dependency ratios due to life-cycle dynamics which should not be confused with distinctly different processes of class-differentiation. Internal dynamics of a different nature have to do with the very concept of 'household' in Tai societies. The Thai/Lao term for household is *khobkhua*, which translates literally as 'covered by kitchen' (Sparkes 2007: 230). The notion of household, thus, revolves around commensal relations which are not limited to blood ties as is the case in the nuclear conceptualisation of the household. Subsequently, household membership is flexible which may lead to significant changes in household composition other than birth, death, and marriage (see also Klausner 1993: 34).

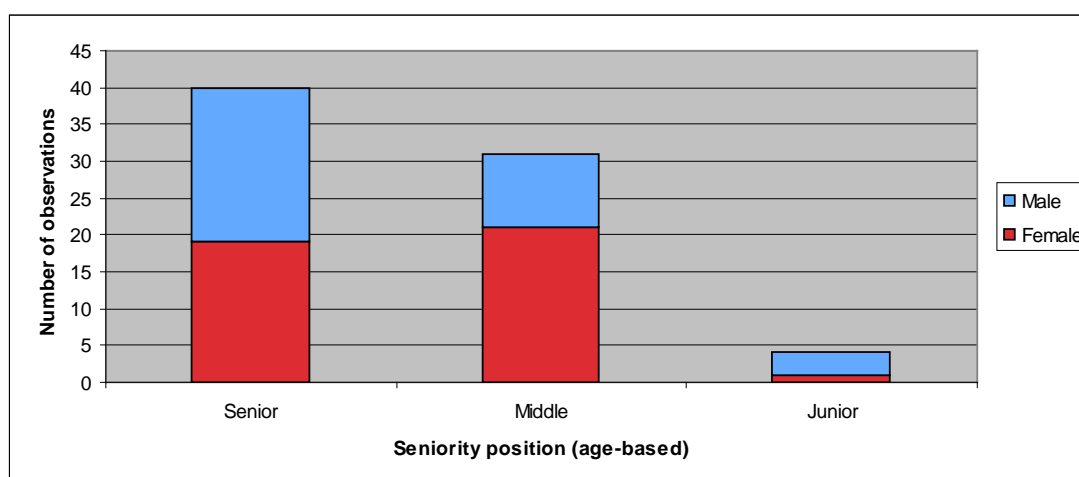
Households are also in flux due to external dynamics. When the ruling Lao communist party in the second half of the 1980s traded its central planned economics based on socialist blueprints for an economy increasingly based on market principles Evans (1995: xxiii) was quick to observe that such a 're-emergence of the market' allowed 'the flexibility of the family farm...to fully reassert itself'. Writing in 2005 after nearly two decades of continued, gradual economic transition, combined with the re-opening of borders with neighbouring Thailand, and a politics of regional integration, Rigg (2005a) goes a step further by arguing that Lao PDR is on the brink of a dramatic reorientation of rural livelihoods: away from the land and less integrated into their rural communities. Such a process of rural change was already observable for some years in other countries (Rigg 2005b). More recent writing have added to these debates notes of caution about the interpretation of rural change as a linear and inevitable process of transition (see e.g. World Bank 2009) by highlighting the political-economy underpinning such dynamics and the range of trajectories, with different and unequal outcomes for various social groups, these lead to (Li 2009). Despite these debates, it are rural youth which are the key actors bringing about these changing rural livelihoods (of various trajectories), and the role of daughters in this has received particular attention (Mills 1997; Elmhirst 2002; Koning 2005).

The second conceptual move, next to appreciating households as in flux, is going beyond the gender-generation nexus in understanding intra-household decision-making processes concerning migration. Considering social age (whether someone is considered a child or youth), relations of relative seniority between dependents in a household, in addition to gender, parent-child relations, and intra-household divisions of labour adds the necessary complexity needed to make sense of not uncommon scenarios in which, for example, the migration of one young member ties other(s) more closely to the household as was clearly evident in the case of Buanoi described above.

With these conceptual adjustments in mind we now return to quantitative data on *Baan Naam's* young migrants. As said, the data set constitutes of 75 young migrants. A minority of these young migrants (6/75; 8%) were not siblings of the head of households and/or spouse. This is share nearly twice as large amongst the young dependents who remained in the natal household following the first migration of the 75 young migrants (19/137; 14%). This illustrates not only the importance of the changing and non-nuclear composition observed in an important minority of the 54 studied households (17; 31%), it is also the result of a particular form of chain migration. Taking in a cousin, a daughter-in-law, or other dependents was on several occasions observed as a response to out-migration of own children and went some way towards filling gaps in the gender and generational division of labour.

Incorporating this constant state of flux of household composition and its influence on migration decision-making processes requires treating relations of seniority between dependents in the household as relative and not static as is the case with birth-order. Figure 3 is based on such a relative conceptualisations of relations of seniority.

**Figure 3: Young migrants by position of relative age-based seniority in the household (n=75)**



Comparing Figure 3 with an analysis based on actual birth order, we see a logical increase in the share of 'seniors' amongst the young migrants vs. that of 'first-borns'. It is worth noting, however, that it also led to a change in gender composition. The analysis by relative seniority showed that slightly more male than female migrated whilst being the most senior dependent in the household at time of migration. This contrasts with a birth-order based analysis in which first born daughters outnumber first born sons (12 vs. 8) amongst the young migrant population. What has happened is that the total number of male young migrants in the category of most senior has increased considerably, whereas this is only marginally the case for female young migrants. Although the numbers are too small to make too much of this, it may reflect a qualitative observation of changing residence patterns following marriage. Despite the lasting relevance of matrilineal residence patterns at an ideological level this was contrasted by various cases in which it were in fact daughters moving in with their in-laws. This also transpires from an interview excerpt with Dalay:

RA: Do you think you will remain in this house since you're the last-born daughter?

Dalay: I don't know, but I see in this village that the last-born is actually not the one looking after the parents when they get old. In fact, the last-born is often the one moving away. And it is mostly an older sister or brother staying behind. Here, it is often the first-born looking after the parents when they get old.

RA: Why is it like that you think?

Dalay: Mostly, the first born is married already and lives with the parents, and, therefore, last-born children tend to move and *liang mèt nyaa* (take care of the husband's mother)

RA: Is this special to *Baan Naam*, or do you also see this in other villages?

Dalay: In other villages it is the same. If, for example, the mother has one son and the son gets married, the family tends to keep the son which means that the wife of this son has to move into the house of the *mèt nyaa* (husband's mother)

(Excerpt from interview with Dalay, a last-born daughter who was at the time of interview single and 15 years old, 14/3/2009)

A further interesting observation in Figure 3 is the fact that in the 'middle' category, the relative involvement of young females versus males increases significantly compared to that in the 'senior' category. This suggests that the involvement of young females in migration is to a greater extent related to the actual presence of a senior young person in the natal household than is the case with young male migrants. Rende Taylor (2005: 422) speaks in her work on household based analysis of migration patterns of the important

role that first-born daughters play as 'home helpers' on the basis of the socio-culturally similar context of Northern Thailand. Adopting a relative notion of seniority rather than the static concept of birth order used by Rende Taylor shows that in the Lao context of *Baan Naam* it is not necessarily the case that the first born daughter takes up this role. But, once a *female dependent* (including a daughter-in-law) has taken up this role, junior females are more prone to become young migrants. Young males in the 'middle' category, on the other hand, appear, however, to become less involved in migration if older siblings are involved in migration. This latter dynamic may relate to the gender imbalance in school participation rates discussed earlier.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has unpacked the apparent paradox between the quantitative observation of an overrepresentation of young women in migration and qualitative observations showing that young women are far more constrained in becoming a young migrant. The analysis presented in this paper has shown that young villagers (of both sexes) exercise considerable agency in becoming and not becoming a young migrants. However, their agency needs to be situated relationally. A conventional focus on relations of gender and parent-child set within a bounded and static notion of the household is, nonetheless, insufficient as it fails to capture differences and shifts in social position between various dependents in the field of the household.

Furthermore, such a nuanced relational approach should be embedded in a conceptualisation of household as 'in flux'. Lao rural households are not only 'in flux' due to internal dynamics related to continuously changing dependency ratios and their physical composition. They are also in flux as due to changing livelihoods orientation brought about by processes of capitalist expansion shaping the contemporary Lao socio-economic landscape. Rural Lao youth are key actors in these processes, albeit it in different forms and not necessarily under the conditions of their choosing. The arena of the household and the process of migration decision-making thus provide a micro-perspective on the intersection of various processes of transition, shedding light on how these processes are negotiated by the various and differently positioned social actors in the household.

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